

Chapter Two: Learn to Relax

People with symptoms of depression often also experience tension, nervousness, and anxiety. These symptoms can interfere with their ability to make decisions, become involved, enjoy activities, or sleep restfully. Tension actually can magnify stomach problems, breathing difficulties, headaches, and other aches and pains. Physical symptoms, like those caused by tension, impact the cycle of depression and can make it worse.

Human beings have a natural ability to protect themselves from stress, called the “relaxation response.” There are several ways of “turning on” this protective mechanism. In this section we describe several methods that help relaxation, including breathing techniques, autogenic techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery. You may use any one, or a combination, to promote relaxation.

The relaxation techniques described in this section were popularized by Dr. Herbert Benson and others and have been used for over two decades.* These types of relaxation are probably different than how you usually think about relaxing, such as watching TV, napping, or taking a walk. In this case, relaxation means turning off the outside world so the mind and body are at rest. Doing relaxation exercises can reduce the tension that causes anxiety or worsens depression symptoms. In order to relax in this way you may need to learn new skills. Just like learning to drive or use a computer, developing these skills takes regular practice, patience, and time before they can be done properly and effectively.

Relaxation is not a cure-all, nor is it silly or useless. Rather, it is a tool that can help you feel calmer and reduce anxiety about facing difficult tasks or situations. Relaxation has a cumulative effect; the more you do it, the easier it gets, and the more it works. Start by doing 2-3 relaxation sessions per week and gradually work up to doing them daily. Many people find when they practice one or two techniques over and over again they

* The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson © 1976.

respond more quickly with each practice. You may find, however, that there are times when it is difficult to get relief from the stresses of the day. Please be patient. If you are having difficulty relaxing, just sit quietly or spend less time using the techniques. Don't avoid practicing; you can get something out of sitting quietly, even for as little as 5 minutes. The log on page 28 will help you keep track of your relaxation schedule and sessions.

General Relaxation Tips

- Pick a quiet place and time during the day when you won't be disturbed for 5 to 10 minutes. Turn off the TV, radio, and telephone.
- Practice the relaxation skills at least a few times a week. (As you get more comfortable, you may want to increase your time to 10-15 minutes and do the exercises daily).
- Don't expect miracles. Learning these skills takes time and practice. It may take a little while before you get the best results.
- Relaxation should be helpful. At worst you might think it is boring, but it may help you relax anyway. If you don't like the methods described here, ask your provider for other suggestions. There are many different types of relaxation techniques from which you can choose. Many methods are available on audio or video tapes.
- Don't evaluate yourself or your performance during the session. It will prevent you from relaxing.
- Don't worry if you have some distracting thoughts; it happens to everyone. If you start thinking, note that you are thinking, then return to your relaxation technique, and concentrate on your breathing.

Relaxation Techniques

Method 1: Deep Breathing Technique

Deep breathing is a relaxation technique in which you concentrate on breathing in relaxation and breathing out stress with every breath (If you have trouble breathing you may want to try another method).

Step 1. Pick a quiet place and set aside 5-10 minutes during the day when you won't be disturbed. You may find it helpful to turn off the TV or radio as well as the phone.

Step 2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. While relaxing it is especially important to avoid muscle tension. A soft chair is usually the best choice. For some people lying down is the most comfortable position. Many people find when they lie down they fall asleep. Although falling asleep is a good sign that you are relaxed, you are no longer practicing the relaxation techniques. We suggest you sit in a favorite chair or on a couch.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Breathe deeply into your abdomen. When you are tense, you tend to breathe shallowly into the upper chest. Breathing deeply into the lower abdomen begins to lower your stress response. As your diaphragm (upper chest) moves downward when you breathe in, your stomach will move outward. You should allow the air to go deeply into the abdomen. (If you have difficulty breathing sitting down, you may stand in a comfortable position with your feet about shoulder width apart, knees straight and not locked, and arms hanging loosely at the sides with shoulders relaxed.)

Step 5. Exhale as completely as you can, through your mouth. Your abdomen will contract as you empty the air from your body.

Step 6. Inhale slowly through your nose, make your belly rise. Imagine the air as it flows deep into your body, filling it with fresh life-giving air, starting at the lower abdomen and slowly rising up to the upper lungs.

Step 7. Exhale again as completely as you can. Remember that breathing slowly and deeply enhances your relaxation response. Exhale and inhale deeply a minimum of 3 times for an immediate calming effect and 10 minutes for deeper relaxation.



Note: If you are having difficulty with inhaling deeply, remember you are learning a new way of breathing. It may take some practice before you learn it. Practice several times a week (or daily if possible); the more you practice the easier it becomes.

Method 2: Autogenic Relaxation

Autogenic relaxation is a technique that uses direct verbal suggestions to promote physical relaxation. This method is similar to meditation. By moving attention away from distracting, non-relaxing thoughts, you can focus on phrases that encourage both physical and mental relaxation.

Step 1. Pick a quiet place and set aside 5-10 minutes during the day when you won't be disturbed. You may find it helpful to turn off the TV or radio as well as the phone.

Step 2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. While relaxing it is especially important to avoid muscle tension. A soft chair is usually the best choice. For some people lying down is the most comfortable position. Many people find when they lie down they fall asleep. Although falling asleep is a good sign that you are relaxed, you are no longer practicing the relaxation techniques. We suggest you sit in a favorite chair or on a couch.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Say to yourself the following statements: "My left hand is heavy. My left hand is heavy. I am at peace and my left hand is heavy." Continue repeating for 60 seconds. If distracting thoughts occur, allow them to fade and continue to repeat the suggestion.

Step 5. Say to yourself, "My right hand is heavy. My right hand is heavy. I am at peace and my right hand is heavy." Continue for another 60 seconds.

Step 6. Repeat the phrases, substituting each foot, arm, leg and finally your overall body in the sentence. If you wish, you may repeat the whole sequence a second time. Practice often (several times a week or daily) and remember that practice makes perfect!

Method 3: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that focuses on specific parts of the body. By tensing and relaxing your muscles you will learn some differences in sensation between tension and relaxation. If you experience chronic pain you may want to try another method.

Step 1. Pick a quiet place and set aside 5-10 minutes during the day when you won't be disturbed. You may find it helpful to turn off the TV or radio as well as the phone.

Step 2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. While relaxing it is especially important to avoid muscle tension. A soft chair is usually the best choice. For some people lying down is the most comfortable position. If you choose to lie down, be sure to have a pillow under your knees and your arms at your sides. Make sure you are in a warm and quiet room. Many people find when they lie down they fall asleep. Although falling asleep is a good sign that you are relaxed, you are no longer practicing the relaxation techniques. We suggest you sit in a favorite chair or on a couch.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Start with your hands; clench your fists, note the sensation of tightness in your skin. Hold this position and note the discomfort of trying to keep your fists clenched. When you start to feel really uncomfortable, LET GO of your fist, noting the feeling of relaxing your hand (i.e. the sensation of warmth that flows through your hand).

Step 5. Now flex your feet. Bring the tops of your feet back toward your knees with your toes clenched. When you start to feel really uncomfortable, relax your feet and note the feeling of warmth as the muscles relax.

Step 6. Move on to other parts of the body; your arms, and legs, and then your stomach and chest, and finally your neck and face.

Method 4: Guided Imagery Relaxation

Guided imagery is a relaxation technique that focuses on detailed images (like a walk on the beach). This technique, similar to a controlled day dream, helps the mind turn off stressful thoughts and reduces tension in the body.

Step 1. Pick a quiet place and set aside 5-10 minutes during the day when you won't be disturbed. You may find it helpful to turn off the TV or radio as well as the phone.

Step 2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. While relaxing it is especially important to avoid muscle tension. A soft chair is usually the best choice. For some people lying down is the most comfortable position. Many people find that when they lie down they fall asleep. Although falling asleep is a good sign that you are relaxed, you are no longer practicing the relaxation techniques. We suggest you sit in a favorite chair or on a couch.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Breathe deeply; inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

Step 5. Imagine a scene that is appealing and relaxing to you. Imagery can include anything from a walk in the forest or on the beach to thinking about some of your favorite places or memorable events. The important thing in practicing guided imagery is that you imagine enough detail to really take you to that place of relaxation.

Here is one example:

You are walking down a set of stairs. The stairs are any style or color that you wish. At each step you notice how it feels to place your foot down and what your surroundings look like; note the different perspective when you stop on each step. There are ten stairs and you may count each one going down: one, (pause, note your surroundings) two, (pause, note your surroundings), three, (etc.), four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. At the bottom of the stairs is a corridor with doors on either side. You choose the door


that leads outside. At your feet is a brick path that you stroll down. It is a warm Spring day. You can feel the sun warm your face and body. You can hear birds singing in the trees and you notice the colors in the garden around you. There is the sound of water and as you move toward it, you may be surprised to notice a brook or river quite near. You may sit there for a while and enjoy the sights, sounds, and sensations of this beautiful, tranquil place.

Step 6. When you are ready to end the session, retrace your steps back to the place in the image where you started and then count slowly from 10 down to 1 before opening your eyes.

Summary

1. Stress can make depression worse. Learning and practicing relaxation skills can help reduce both.
2. Relaxation is a natural solution to stress.
3. There are different ways to relax. Choose the ones that appeal to you.
4. Like any new skill, relaxation takes time and practice to master. The more you practice, the easier it is to relax and the easier it is to stay relaxed in stressful situations.

Relaxation Log

 Use this log to chart your relaxation sessions and to monitor changes in your mood over time. Before your begin your session, use the scale below to indicate your level of tension. After you complete the session, use the same scale to rate how you feel. Remember: it may take a number of sessions before you notice improvement.

0 = very calm and relaxed, the most relaxed you have ever been

10 = very tense, anxious, or nervous, the most tense you have ever been

Week 1 Dates to

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Date							
Before							
After							

Week 2 Dates to

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Date							
Before							
After							

Week 3 Dates to

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Date							
Before							
After							

Week 4 Dates to

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Date							
Before							
After							